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THE DIVINE PROVIDENCE

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The belief in a doctrine of Providence, at least in some sense of the word, is inseparable from theism. Let a man once assume a good God or a righteous universe, and he thereby also assumes that all events must be directed, or at least overruled, for good. Perhaps, however, it is a little easier to declare what one means when he says, "there is a God," than to explain what one means by "the divine Providence." Do we believe in a special Providence, that enters into each particular act or moment, so that, for example, it is literally true that not a sparrow "shall fall to the ground without your Father"? Do we think that the infinite Power carries every individual life in its thought, and even plans, and cares what each man does, suffers, or enjoys? Or do we think of Providence as merely a general guiding agency, like the intelligence that steers a ship in safety without any special responsibility for the conduct or the pleasure of the passengers? Do we think that a man can interfere, by the exercise of his little will, with the working of divine Providence? Or does Providence also enter into and direct the motion of every individual will, as it may be conceived to enter into the motion of the sands on the beach?

In one view it might be as well not to ask any of these questions. It may be held that the idea of a good Providence goes with a very common and helpful religious sentiment. This is trust, or faith. It is expressed in the ancient words, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Or again, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." It matters little, it may be said, whether such trust as this be required to justify and explain itself. It is better to cherish it, though ever so vague, or even without giving any reason for it, than not to have it at all. For without it life would hardly be bearable.

We are challenged, however, at times to ask, and to answer,

what we mean by this marvellous trust in a righteous or beneficent Providence. Some tremendous calamity occurs, like the eruption of Vesuvius or the earthquakes at San Francisco and Valparaiso. In the face of such a vast devastation, the whole world is set to thinking. Is this destruction and slaughter also a part of the divine Providence?

There are indeed minds that are forced early and often to raise this searching question, without waiting for colossal happenings. They are sensitive to the common daily facts of bruises, pain, disease, misfortune, death, crimes, wars. What can Providence mean in a world where such things color all life and characterize history? The faculty of reason in us will not leave us content to hide our heads in the sand like ostriches; we are obliged to ask what kind of a world is it that we live in, orderly or not, rational or not, good or bad, providential or moving at random? It is at least a tenable theory that we have minds and a sense of justice because we share the thought and the compelling righteousness of a good Power. In any case we do well to use our minds and to exercise our sense of justice. There are those of us who cannot help ourselves in this regard; we had rather die than be forbidden to ask the questions that the universe urges upon us.

Moreover, we who are parents, or teachers, or friends, are bound sometimes to define what we mean, or at least what we do not mean, by Providence, in order to set aside certain dreadful notions of God's doings which on occasion our children or our neighbors disclose. Thus, the letter of one of the narrators of the earthquake in California tells of a child who remarked, "Now I know there is a God, for no one else could shake the earth so awful." And the prayer appointed by one of our American bishops to be read in his diocese after the disaster uses the words, "When thou hast made the earth to tremble and the mountains thereof to shake." Here is something very like the old Greek conception of Poseidon, the earth-shaking God. We submit that it needs extremely wise teaching to relieve the minds of children, and grown people too, of the terror of this crude thought.

Again, while it is wonderfully suggestive that in the public comment upon great calamities very little of the old thought of them as a judgment upon men's sins appears, yet we know that this

idea survives and finds occasional utterance. "It was all on account of the terrible wickedness of the city," said a good Roman Catholic maid to her employer after the disaster at San Francisco, hardly conscious of the heavy ruin of the property of her own Church in that city. Here is a fearful load on men's minds, so often as they still think of God as dealing out vengeance and punishment like an angry oriental potentate. Almost better have no God at all, than a God whose Providence we could not respect—less godlike than the best men are. As against such a God of vengeance, we go over to the side of the defiant but noble Prometheus.

Hardly more tolerable is the notion of God's Providence as "sending," as it were arbitrarily, pain, death, and calamity, by way of discipline and chastening. The trouble with this conception is that God is set forth as over against mankind. He disciplines, and their part is to suffer. He does what he pleases, even when he pleases to chasten them for their good. But we do not easily love a God who does as he pleases or acts arbitrarily towards his creatures. Our ethical and spiritual demand is for a conception of a God of whom it may be said, "In all their affliction he was afflicted."

In fact, we believe it would be truer to say that God could not have helped the fact of the sorrow, the blow, the eruption, or the earthquake, than to say this bold and terrible word, "He sent it upon us." This brings us frankly to the question whether there is not a true sense in which we must deny the prevalent thought of the omnipotence of deity, and admit that as he may be conceived to suffer with men in their sorrows, so he may be thought of as being bound, or compelled, or limited (by self-limitation it may be), as men are doubtless bound and limited. We are reminded at once of the great name of John Stuart Mill, as one who was obliged to limit God's omnipotence in order to save his goodness.

There are several modes of philosophy which go to the limitation of the divine power, and lead thus to a changed idea of his Providence. We may try the method of dualism, and, like the Persians, admit a God of mischief as well as a God of righteousness. Even Professor William James appears to suggest diverse powers behind phenomena. But modern science is built upon the

conception of a universe. Every new fact that we observe, or trace to its nexus of relations, carries our minds up to a conviction of an underlying unity. The whirlwind and the storm are related to the sunshine, without which the air could not have been stirred. The earthquake itself is found to be an incident in an orderly process through which the world has become habitable. This idea of a universe, where all things play together, rules intentional mischief or hate out of the whole field of natural happenings.

Meanwhile, it is well-nigh impossible to conceive of a universe in which all outward nature, inclusive of blight, disease, and death, is bound together, and to admit at the same time a scheme of dualism or pluralism to account for the untoward events in human history or in the life of the individual. If this is a universe in any sense, it must be a universe throughout, inclusive of human suffering, crime, and unhappiness. In fact, the dualists generally expect eventual harmony and the triumph of good over evil. This is to confess faith in a universe, where good is the ruling principle, and evil only a phase or an incident. The old question therefore recurs, How does evil get into a good universe?

It seems childish to say that matter, with which the guiding and beneficent intelligence of the world has to work, is more or less inchoate and unmalleable in its nature. For where does matter come from? Is it another and independent power which the Almighty has to learn to handle? The truth is that the order, the beauty, and the correlation of the processes of nature are just as conspicuous in the things that hurt and sting us, and wreck our ships and overturn our palaces, as in the things that merely please us. The eye of the house-fly or the skin of the rattlesnake is as great a marvel of creation as the peach tree or the rose bush.

It used to be urged that God governed the world by second causes. It was as if he had set up a hierarchy of powers—gravitation, heat, electricity, and others—and left them, like the inferior gods of the Greek pantheon, to take care of the world while he rested. When anything mischievous happened, we had to lay it not to God, but to the wild or untamed power, as men once blamed Aeolus, or as Aeolus himself blamed his own winds. Everyone of course sees that whatever God's forces do (whatever "forces" may mean), God himself does, and must be accountable

for, so far at least as there is accountability at all. We gain nothing in the clearness of our thought by separating the powers of the world from the ruling intelligence, any more than by separating the realm of matter from the realm of the spirit.

Is it not possible, however, that there may be a general Providence, guiding the processes of nature and the life of conscious creatures toward good, without entering into the details of their processes? This is what Tennyson's lines suggest:

So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

But in this view the doctrine of Providence which the religious instinct demands seems almost wholly to evaporate. There is no sense of love in a universe that takes no care for the individual life. What is the use of the type, if the single life is of no account? There is no general welfare in a world whose individuals are sacrificed. For the general good is composed of the good of the units. Either there is no God at all, in our human use of the word and for any practical purpose, or else the Providence that cares for the whole cares also for the parts and for the individuals. But if God cares for us in our enjoyments, and ordains our gains and growth and welfare, how is not God also behind our sorrows, our losses, and our ills?

It has been said that God's Providence, and therefore his power, is limited by man's freedom of will. Mischief enters the world through man's wilful misdoings. This is very like the naïve story in Genesis. The fact is that all that man calls evil in the physical world, including man's own brute ancestry, lies back of Eden and is wrapped up in world conditions with which man had nothing to do. The worst enemies of our happiness are not plague and pestilence, but ignorance, hatred, jealousy, selfishness—all inherited with the animal nature. If these things constitute "original sin," then we did not originate sin, any more than we created our own wills, but sin is simply our misfortune; or—shall we say?—one of the inevitable conditions upon which we are made to be men.

Let us frankly admit that we cannot see how to limit God's power, or his wisdom, without also limiting his goodness as well.

If there is a God in any valid sense, he is not a blunderer. He is not a mere learner as we are; he has not abdicated his responsibility, or left blind forces to act in his stead; he cannot be handicapped for want of adequate power; there is nowhere the sense that his power is giving out. If he cares for the whole, it must be by virtue of caring for all the details and the parts. If he is one, it is because he is also immanent in all things. If he makes the good to appear, it must be because he uses also what we call evil. In short, a divine Providence must be a Providence in particulars. Everything and every life enters into the divine order of a universe.

There is one form of the limitation of the divine Power that we have not considered: Omnipotence, at least if guided by wisdom and goodness, cannot do preposterous and incongruous things; cannot make a square other than a square, or two plus two more than four. It cannot at the same time have a thing and go without it, any more than we can. It cannot create a finite world in time and space, and not use the conditions of finiteness. In other words, we cannot think of God or his universe except in terms of rationality.

Let us venture now, though with becoming modesty, to suggest certain respects in which we men may enter into, and even sympathize with, God's limitations in the working of his Providence. We, who are parents or teachers, admit hardships, pain, and trouble into our children's lives as really as God admits the same factors into the lives of men generally. We sit by with unused power to help them and unused knowledge to direct them, and we let them stumble and fall and suffer, and do not interfere. We put sharp tools into their hands, prevising that they will cut themselves. We could keep them off the ice, or out of perilous sail-boats, or out of games and sports; but we choose to see them go into various ways of danger. The tender mother on occasion sends her boy to die for his country, and often to do business in the wilderness or on the sea. It is the highest form of human love that thus lets its children suffer. It is a lower form of love that tries to exempt them from all pain.

The truth is that life is somehow a study or discipline, and also at the same time an appreciation and enjoyment of values in a great developing hierarchy of "uses," as Swedenborg truly insists.

We might conceivably get for our children ease, comfort, luxury, wealth, exemption from pain. But, without depreciating these things, we know that they are of very low value. Comfort and luxury rarely, if ever, make men any better, or bring anything more than a momentary thrill of happiness. We know that, like an enervating atmosphere, they mostly harm the lives of young people. We also know that out of bumps, bruises, cuts, falls, blunders, humiliation, children learn to walk, to ride, to sail, to wrestle, and above all, to reach the high terms of courage, constancy, loyalty, truth, friendship.

We do not "chasten" our children; we do not arbitrarily trip them up and make them fall; we do not stand over against the child and send humiliation or distress upon him. On the contrary, in the true home, we are with the child in our sympathy; we suffer with his bruises and wounds; we feel his humiliation when he has failed in his lessons or has done wrong. We suffer with him, even though we can foresee how brief his pain will be, and know that he will be better and not worse for it in the end. It is a world of cost. There is no value without the law of cost. God himself cannot have human values without human suffering.

We may catch here a hint or parable of the divine Providence. We cannot think of God as standing away from the world of men and inflicting discipline as a taskmaster. But we conceive of God as in and with all human toil, struggle, and suffering. Life is not our business as men, apart from God, or God's affair apart from men. The enterprise, the values, the cost, the sufferings, are his and ours too. It is a common life. This is the real doctrine of the incarnation. The story of the Christ is only the type of it. It is universal. If God suffered in one man, he suffers wherever men suffer.

Here is the mystery of love; it cannot be at all without cost and pain—not in God or man. Omnipotence could not set at nought a spiritual fact. Here is the mystery of pain. It can be translated into power, into wisdom, into goodness. We see the almost miraculous process daily. God's love is like our love; it contains sorrow as well as joy, and is richer so and more truly love.

All this goes with a different thought of God from what was

once held. God was the Absolute and the Abstract. You got the thought of God by thinking away whatever was most real to you as a man. God could not suffer or sympathize. This was to deny a real God. We are coming reverently to think of God as the one Life in which all real things consist; in which power, beauty, order, justice, love are one; in which therefore sorrow as well as joy is contained. Who was ever hurt, that is, made to be less truly a person, because of sorrow? The divine Life is not less, but more, by reason of this fact. We conceive that sympathy, then, is in the very nature of God. This conception, once entertained, alters forever the problem of the nature of the divine Providence touching human calamity. We see what is meant in the saying that the "whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together." All this is part of the order of a divine universe.

We have already spoken of the risks and ventures of life. Let us be bold enough now to suggest that the element of hazard is essential to life. In other words, life would mean less and be less without it; and omnipotence could not repair the loss if this strand were cast out of the world. We practically say this daily. We would not vote to exclude risks and ventures. Or if we would so agree, it would be in our moods of weakness, fear, and indolence, not in the hour of our health and the mood of our manliness. A part of the daily work of life is to clear away wreckage, to bury the dead, to lay broader foundations, to build straighter road-beds and stancher ships—not to flee from the struggle and cost of existence, but to adjust ourselves more intelligently and hopefully to its ruling conditions. Thus the people of the wrecked city of San Francisco went to work at once to rebuild on the same risky site. They were willing to take their venture, though they might have sought a place safe from earthquakes. We take certain risks every day in our sports with a sense of joyous excitement, as also in the hazards of legitimate trade. We actually should not love life so well in a world where nothing happened, where no ventures challenged our daring, where the Weather Bureau had learned to be perfectly accurate in its forecasts. We are shy of a Bellamy Commonwealth, partly because it looks too prosperous, too comfortable, too safe, too barren of heroism. We say this in perfect

consistency with every attempt to modify brutal hazards, to save life, to assuage suffering, to transfer the field of venture from gross and vile forms of injustice and war to the fair fields of helpful social enterprise. We still believe that man must take brave ventures in some form as long as light and darkness alternate on the earth.

Shall we not be right now in saying that there is a poetic or dramatic element in life? We do not mean in a vulgar or spectacular sense, but rather in that view of the drama in which it has been said that it is the work of tragedy to "purify the soul." To call the development of the world and the process of history dramatic is to call it intellectual, moral, spiritual, significant. We should despise life if we did not surmise that it moved toward some splendid end and was finally to be interpretable into the victory of goodness which Paul calls "the manifestation of the sons of God."

There are two ways of looking at any work of construction. You can see it as a whole, as it lies in the mind of the poet or architect. In this sense you may pronounce it all very good. At our highest moments, in view of the grand procession of noble persons who have walked the earth, we men may even dare to say this of the universe. We see the splendid lines of its integrity; we see light always shining beyond its shadows; we see beauty, goodness, heroism, unity; we see in the noble and generous lives the high fruitage of God's world; we see all things ministering to the grand result; we think of ourselves as belonging, like citizens, to an ideal realm; at our best, we are sure in this large perspective that life is worth whatever it has cost.

The other view of the work of the poet or builder is as one sees only a part at a time, or looks on as the work progresses. We see the bare beginnings of the edifice, with the dust and chaos. We read only a part of the story, wherein there are chapters of pain and disappointment. The poet himself, we are certain, suffered also at these sorrowful points in his story. There are places in the drama where we may wish we had not come to see it, glad as we are afterwards that we stayed through to the victorious close.

Now it is not in omnipotence to have the whole and not to have the parts of which it is made; not to have the contrasts, not to have the heart-rending chapters, not to have the solemn passages, not to

have the seeming defeat of true love, before love had learned its mighty lesson of absolute devotion, to be willing to die that love might live.

So, we conceive, it is not in omnipotence to have man at all in this universe and not to have him first as a child or even as an untutored savage. It is not in God's power to have the type of Christ prevail in this world, and not to pass through terrible chapters where Herods and Caesars oppressed the innocent. Neither is it possible for any of us, even though we may hope that we share at times the thought of the infinite builder and poet, to stand by the wreck and waste and sorrow of some great human tragedy, and not cry out in sympathy, as men of the old times cried, "How long, O Lord, how long!" It is well for us to cry out, but we have a new hope in our cry. God is with us in it. There is no vengeance behind the calamity. Daily we learn to use the powers of nature as if indeed we were God's sons; to be unterrified by them, to rise superior to them; and even, if we must, to give up our little lives under their shock, with unabated confidence that they cannot hurt the indomitable spirit of man.

Men are already learning to a wonderful degree to take almost at the same time these two different views of vast public calamities, conflagrations, earthquake shocks, railroad accidents. On one side we are touched with the sense of a common suffering. We are all made to share it. We call it dreadful. On the other hand, we see it, as perhaps men never could have seen such an event before, with a sense of the wholeness of history. Again and again we find a great population undaunted by their troubles and stirred to a new civic patriotism. We see the civilized world coming to the help of ruined cities or famine-stricken provinces, and pouring in material and treasure to repair the loss, just as the wounded body draws contributions of restoring life from every cell. We see an awakening of sympathy and humanity binding the races of men together. We look forward a little while, and foresee safer and more splendid cities than those which have been destroyed. A little later the signs of the wreck will be covered with beauty. On the vast scale of the life of mankind, nothing has happened more serious than when, in a child's life, he has bruised his finger in a door or cut his foot with an ax. In the case of the great tragedy,

as with the sorrow and hurt of the child, no real or lasting evil has come to the values of the moral and spiritual life. There is no loss of human courage, patience, loyalty, good will. On the contrary, these grand values stand forth in clearer light.

There is a fine thought of Browning in his *Asolando* that may help us now. He traces the course of evolution:

From the first, Power was—I knew!
Life has made clear to me
That, strive but for closer view,
Love were as plain to see.

Let us venture to develop this thought. It is as if an artist were painting a picture. The artist sees it all in his mind's eye before he begins, as the Almighty Creator eternally carries the world in his thought. But look at the artist's beginning. It is a bare surface of pasteboard or canvas; then we see a mere crude sketch and vague lines; then the appearance of daubs and patches of color. Who would not criticize and condemn if this were all?

So with the course of God's world evolving in time. What could there be first except power? How could love show itself in the tremendous processes of a cooling planet? How could love be manifest in the great dull saurian creatures? Yet love is present, waiting and pressing to appear, though everything else must come first. Love is moral harmony: intelligence, art, music, and righteousness must work their way into the picture before love, the harmony, can come to view.

Intelligence now appears on the scene; men come with minds to ask questions and share the wonder of thought. The sense of beauty and the moral sense come to birth. Love presses the more to enter into the world. It takes its risks as it comes into a society only emerging from the animal life; it enters a world of strife and passion. It is the mightiest form of power yet known. But few yet possess intelligence enough to know the power of love when it comes. It has to win its way. The points where it appears seem out of relation with the great masses of the old crude wash that covers the canvas. The men who first know love are sufferers and martyrs, standing out in relief against the brutal world around them. The Christs go to their death. The lovers of liberty are

beheaded. All the more love, always pressing for admittance, wins over the hearts of men, stirs new thoughts in them, rouses their sense of justice, creates fresh and ideal demands. Every martyrdom is at last translated into a prayer, taken up now by the millions, that the world may be changed and redeemed from the ancient struggle of force to the beautiful order of love. Every pain is a mode of urgency, calling for light, intelligence, skill, and goodness. Every prayer or desire of man for the ideal things is the pressure of the love of God, the tireless artist, bringing beauty, welfare, and joy. Nothing is wasted in his work. Love comes as intelligence comes, as fast as men can bear it, as soon as they want it. It comes where power alone and knowledge alone have made men cry out for the harmony and unity that only love adds to life. Men could not have love, men could not understand it, nor pray for it aright, nor value it enough when it comes, if they had not first known the contrast of a world of power without love as yet made evident in it. The brute, selfish, loveless life must come first in the order of growth, that love might conquer at last. The law of contrast is in the nature of the universe, in the mind of God.

We may get some light now on certain alleged facts that men call "special providences." There are those indeed who repel us by their claim to be God's favorites, for whose sole benefit interventions are made, while others must suffer. The trains on which they travel are safeguarded, they tell us; they are providentially kept from taking the steamship doomed to wreck. We refer to another class of happenings. The most intelligent of men will sometimes tell us that everything in their lives seems to them, as they look back, to have been ordered aright. At least everything was usable and assimilable. All the events have fallen into line, and combined to make a unity. Even what seemed untoward things have proved to be good and not evil. It is as if the individual life followed some divine pattern or plan.

What now would you expect? Once grant the idea of an almighty artist or master of life, and it follows that, deep beneath the show of things, lines and patterns must everywhere prevail. God sees them and means them. It follows, again, that whenever any man enters into or shares in a measure the divine intelligence, and especially shares the divine purpose of goodness, in other words,

when a man orders his life with intelligent good-will, he sees somewhat as God sees; the patterns, the beauty, the unity, disclose themselves in small things as in large. The wing of the butterfly is as marvellous as the sight of the Alps. The story of the individual life may be more complete a unity than the bodily organism is. Take, for example, the Life of Gladstone, or Andrew D. White's Autobiography, or Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* "All things work together for good" in such lives.

It is possible that we might even go further, and catch a clue to certain strange psychic facts. If all life goes by a master plan, who shall say that sensitive minds, Isaiah, for example, or Joan of Arc, taught by love, may not on occasion see below the bare surface of things, or see further than their neighbors, and so detect the ruling lines of destiny? For the world is structural and orderly; coming events do often cast their shadows before. There is a real science of prophecy, whereby the lover of justice or the seeker for truth has glimpses from the mountain top, and sees as if with the eye of God.

All this may seem to be very bold. "Who by searching can find out God?" Let us then put aside every venturesome word. Let us suppose that it is useless to question the divine Providence, or to seek to understand it. There remains a solid and impressive series of facts of experience. There is an attitude or mood in which man is at his strongest and best, in which indeed he is invincible. It is the attitude of trust—we will not say resignation; it is a higher and richer mood; there is hope in it or expectancy of good. Observe that this is exactly the attitude which one would take on the assumption of a divine world and a beneficent God. It is the attitude that corresponds to the ideas which we have been considering. It looks as if the ideas and the attitude ought to go together. But we will suppose now that a man takes this habitual attitude of trust, without seeking to give it any intellectual interpretation more than this vague but splendid faith, namely, that life must be well, here and hereafter, and in all times and places, for him who seeks to do his best and to "follow the glint." This is the substance of practical religion.

Now it is evident that the universe answers to the use of this trust in it. We have the testimony of innumerable witnesses on

this point. The noblest intelligences are one with the host of the humble good. The world certainly behaves like God's world to those who treat it so. No one ever took this attitude and found it to fail. No one ever took it for a day who found that day idle or unhappy. No one having strayed from this way ever came back to it and did not find it more solid than ever under his feet. No one in this attitude was ever discomfited. It looks, therefore, as if we touched here as firm a bit of reality as the world contains. In short, "the witness of the spirit" throughout generations runs with Whittier's lines,

That more and more a Providence
Of love is understood,
Making the springs of time and sense
Sweet with eternal good;

That death seems but a covered way
Which opens into light,
Wherein no blinded child can stray
Beyond the Father's sight.